

XENON

1.

2.

Fruiting body. Almac performance. Coiling lemniscate. Serpentine auger. Terror herald. Absolution by subspace incline. Ferrous deathwall. Albolite looms Ker-porous over the ornament tournament. Horror water. Insubordination of differential omni-caste. Hyperstate seraphic saber shield. Tumor danger. Obscured meanings. Turpentine radial metaphor morphology. The things that first set pattern orbital waveform terminal obfuscation fields in headspace pulp containers. Objects of the senses. Inclinations by which language folds. The living and the dead. The wake warning of firearm harbinger alarm. Metaphor. Morphophor. Dream analysis.

3.

It is the 87th day of my incarceration. I still haven't stopped sweating. For most of my hours in this cavern of greening bricks and breathy moisture, I am bound and suspended so that I do not touch the floor. There is something in the air that makes my head light, and I am almost always nauseous. At sporadic intervals, a man in black removes my bindings and leads me down a narrow, dripping passage to a still-wetter chamber.

It possesses no peculiar qualities beyond its smell, like mold and damp stone. While my room smells the same, in here there is a special pungency to the odor that causes my nose to recoil. Overhead, there is a continuous gurgle of rushing water. A leather chair speckled with dew stands at its center, and a meal awaits me on top of it. It is my only food in quite some time. I eat it ravenously.

“Sit,” a voice says. I do.

There is no loudspeaker in this room.

“Tell me about your dreams.” it says.

This is what I am always asked, and I have not spoken to anyone in so long that I tend to oblige. It is a woman’s voice, but possesses a raspy, masculine quality that makes my spine bristle. It repeats its demands as I lick last dregs of my meal from my teeth.

I answer in no particular direction.

In my dream, I was a cicada in the midst of a great seasonal emergence from the ground. We strode across the grass and up the trees in huge, heaping, chittering waves, scuttling and stumbling over one another recklessly. For years I had lived in an empty sleep beneath the earth, a cold limbless slumber without thoughts or feelings. I recalled nearly two decades of that sleep, and the dulled sensation of my proboscis piercing into the root of a great pine tree. I recalled the cold of uncountable, unfathomable winters, the heat of infinite summers, an eternity spent

unconscious. I recalled an awakening from the earth, a shedding of the old skin, a rising like a tide with a billion souls indistinct from me in every way.

The voice asks me what I felt in the dream.

I felt young. I reveled in the thrill of it. All my brothers and sisters knew that we were not long for the world, and that gave a kind of thrill in itself. We chattered and hummed our massive noise together, and it gathered all the smooth-moving creatures who devoured us. Like all creatures that lived long and for whom death was tragic, they didn't, they couldn't, understand.

We squealed and spun through the air, joined in swarms so large that even a sporadic death could not diminish the ecstasy. We mated feverishly with each other, enchanted by the chattering songs that vibrated through our soft, bloodless white innards as naturally as breathing. We had such speed and health. We thrilled in chase by the smooth-moving creatures, beating our wings against the air and evading them again and again with ease.

When we'd had our fill of one another and at last relaxed into a wonderful kind of exhaustion, we fell onto our backs, curled our spindly legs around each other and died. We died pitying the smooth-moving beasts that ate us. If any creature were to live at length in such a world as that, they might begin to take all its magic and beauty as natural and wearisome, and might die despairing of its loss without aweing at its gain.

In that way, the dream was like youth.

The voice prods me again. Search the meaning, it says, and pry out the reason you were given this dream. Provide an interpretation.

I can't think of one. But there is another part of this dream that I do not tell them. I have been warned against sharing it.

To change the subject, I work myself up enough to ask why I'm here.

I sense the voice hesitate. The sound of a clearing throat fills the room.

The voice assures me I am not being punished. They are working to find something of great importance hidden in the dreams and thoughts of the human mind, and I am one of a scarce few who can discern it. They say that it is beautiful and powerful, but dangerous and hungry, emitting waves which can bring bodily mutation or shape the properties of matter. If it were to fall into reckless hands, it could bring cataclysm unlike anything humanity has ever known.

Cataclysm.

I speak again. Could such a thing really come from mere dreams?

The voice says that these dreams were given to me by a kind of unearthly messenger. They hide the things of God and the devil, lofty secrets that we are not equipped to grasp in an unaltered psychic state. This is why the dreams are wrapped in earthly metaphors and narratives and coincidences, like the emergence of cicadas. The dreamer is sometimes subtly made aware of the secret in the dream,

and might incidentally or purposefully divulge it if care is not taken to contain them.

The voice says I should take comfort in the great humanitarian task I am enduring, and claims many people can be saved if I endure a little longer.

I ask the voice another question. If these dreams contain the things of God and the devil, how do they know which is which?

They don't, the voice confesses.

Finally, I ask: what cataclysm are they trying to prevent by interpreting these dreams?

The voice declines to answer.

4.

The interviews were probably the most difficult thing. This was before pattern recognition was automated, so the reading and the notetaking was all done by hand in stacks of papers a foot high, all bleeding red ink with every imaginable theory strewn on napkins and in margins. It was all hands on deck. Every warm body had an interview they were marking through, and with how little information we had, our efforts were completely unguided.

Curiosity was enough to keep us awake night after night reading through the interviews, hungry for the secret of the Espers. We craved a pattern, a formula in it all. There really wasn't any pattern, or at least any pattern we could postulate over without the help of very, very strong psychedelics. Looking for one only resulted in mountains of wasted man-hours.

Thankfully it wasn't a totally Sisyphean exercise. The antipattern awareness events we languished to find were eventually correlated with mental state. Sudden realization, memory loss, even a particularly vivid dream could force the human mind into "half-awareness". That was the term we used for a time, but we didn't know it was the exact opposite. Half-awareness was actually a kind of hyper-sensitivity to antipatterns, a full and undiminished sense of reality from all sides, paradoxical or otherwise. Dreams are like that. It's all nonsense, but the fake memories and logic of the dream are clear as crystal. You let go of sanity, jump down the rabbit hole and drink tea with the hatter, reason be damned.

In those days, we didn't make any connection between Deviants and the Espers. To this day the connection's quite tenuous, but we found it. We even found out why psychedelics let us interpret dreams so well.

To be honest I don't care to dwell on it. The questions admit nothing of how horrible the answers are. Answers we still cannot share.

5.

Antinomy

&

Antimony

The Compiled Writings of

DR. ALEXANDER O. KRAUSE

FOREWORD

By Julian Briar

It is difficult, even impossible, to separate the poignant genius of Alexander Krause from the social and political undercurrents of his time. He was an undergraduate in the heyday of existentialism and post-war ennui, and it is no surprise that these influences would lead to his thick moral nihilism, his famous frustrations with science, and his eternally strained relationship with academia. These attitudes only came to light well after his scientific achievements, allowing his writings to see mainstream appeal where they might otherwise be confined to manifestos.

His social circle at Columbia swung between young coteries of radical Marxists and inflexible fascists, all with markedly existentialist attitudes. These swings were only interrupted by bouts of alcoholism, often prompting Krause to reverse his political leanings and find new friends ad nauseam. By his third year

studying political science, he'd largely disregarded his former extremism as “a stunning lesson in the epidemiology of bad ideas.”

His growing distaste for politics would cause him to change majors and pursue a career in science, where disproving bad ideas would bring him revolutionary success in the study of extraspatial phenomena. He received his doctorate in 1972, and professors regularly noted his infectious enthusiasm and searing intelligence. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for his contributions to the field in 2015 after a lifetime of achievement. Still, he clung to maverick idealism in his personal life, most famously in disorganized critiques of empiricism and the scientific method.

That enigma of personality, the Nobel laureate who distrusts science, is probably responsible for his meteoric rise to popularity. Parsing out exactly how this paradox resolves itself—or doesn't—is what makes his writings so compelling, and is at least partially why I have sought to organize his thoughts and professional letters here. His discussions of natural phenomena have a kind of heavy, cynic poetry which could only be spun by someone who knew them intimately and hated to see them dissected. His professional work seems to be utterly lifeless by comparison, a fact I would not want to gloss over by omission.

In my interviews with Krause's contemporaries, I was struck by the diversity of opinions he garnered. Some viewed him with total reverence while others bemoaned his empty rants against science and their consequences. Most puzzling of all were the few who told me his outspoken attitudes were all a façade. Mabel C. Turner had this to say on his character:

“Don’t take him at face value. Nobody gets to be the granddaddy of Enigmatic Mechanics without having some eccentricities, after all. You have to separate the anti-intellectual from Alexander Krause. They’re two different people. Alex liked cats. Professor Pol Pot liked liquor.”

Perhaps the oxymoronic Professor Pol Pot was purely an act, born to attach ideas to a locomotive personality. Perhaps his detractors are right, and he was driven mad by the rigors of the field he created. Perhaps he is merely another tick in any tally of socially stunted geniuses. In his own famous words, his recent passing “abandons us to questions we cannot search,” including the question of his mania. One can only hope that by compiling his writings, future adolescent mavericks might delight in such unsearchable questions the way he did.

6.

In 1981, a group of researchers received special permissions to stimulate the development of a human fetus using gametes sampled from compatible Espes. If successful, the project could pave the way for gene-static artificial Espers, practically the holy grail of modern bioengineering. Their intermediary goal was to synthetically replicate the conditions for antipattern awareness before the first trimester, as findings increasingly showed it was possible.

Since animal minds were too simple for this kind of heightened psychic state, academic consensus held that antipattern awareness in early gestation would likewise prove impossible. Contrary to expectation, a motivating study would find signs of antipattern awareness as early as the eighth week of pregnancy.

That “sharp receptor” genes could express themselves so early was utterly mystifying. Eerie even. It indicated that genes causing heightened receptiveness to psychedelics had a kind of priority in development which was totally incongruous with their function. Either the intimate mechanics of the sharp receptors were far, far more complex than their obvious behavior would suggest, or the human genome was being molested by outside influences on an unprecedented scale. Neither conclusion was acceptable, and grant boards immediately commissioned a better answer.

Experiments in the incubation of human children were not unheard of at that point, but ethical and legal ramifications had precluded anything so radical in prior research. Even so, medical technologies of the time could accurately replicate the conditions of a healthy womb without any risk of developmental abnormalities. Given these conditions, infant mortality was an afterthought. Fetal subjects would be so closely monitored that any cause for alarm could be immediately addressed.

For the project's benefactors, this level of assurance was sufficient to waive any moral hesitation.

If something went wrong, it would be cataloged and explained.

Then, after months of slow, bubbling panic, the team reached over a hundred incidental fatalities.

All of these deaths were without any medically apparent cause. Despite a massive investigation to find one, its conclusion was that “neither intentional disruption nor developmental malady can account for such lethal results.”

It seemed almost deliberate.

Many of the researchers left the project during this period of inexplicable morbidity. Some cited moral objections to the pointless expenditure of infant life, but a larger portion expressed anxiety around the tests themselves. To these researchers, it seemed apparent that some sort of malignant influence was actively working against the project's goals: black magic, voodoo logic, psychic phenomena or something of the sort. While none of these claims had substantial evidence to support them, there was also no reasonable theory to challenge a supernatural one. Paranoia ran rampant, and the team would continue to hemorrhage researchers well into the following months.

Just before mass exodus could kill the project, a fetus reached seven months of development with no notable irregularities. The 112th child was given obsessive round-the-clock supervision by the remaining staff, however sparse. Their holy grail seemed at hand, though they'd climbed a mountain of half-formed infants to reach it. What's worse, they could still provide no reason why one had lived where so many others had died.

The team had produced, in sum, a medical waste truck of fetal remains and one healthy child cryogenically preserved by the five researchers still remaining. The rest, in fear or guilt or paranoia or some combination thereof, never involved themselves with GC-Platinum or its findings again.

This study, conducted in the face of all morality, had ramifications so uncanny that no parties involved could acknowledge it. Facilities and equipment were scoured

for contaminants without success. Every crevice and particle was combed for an explanation, but behind the misty curtain of physical mechanisms there was nothing hiding. One hundred and eleven infants had simply dropped dead. The cause remained invisible.

What was this unseen factor, this influence which caused such unconscionable fatalities? Whatever it was, it was a clear portent of future scientific collapse. A more pressing question still remained: could decades of research really afford to be called into question? Could the scientific enterprise bear such blasphemies against it? Could it confess that malignant influences, the ghosts of old superstitions, can touch the human heart with a curse?

If it could, the project wouldn't be classified.

The remaining team decided to name the survivor Mary. If her half brothers and sisters were anything to go by, Mary would have the life expectancy of a housecat when revived, so naming her was against their better judgment. At the time, they couldn't know how groundbreaking their apparent failure was. The inexplicable results would later become the bedrock of Enigmatic Mechanics, single-handedly shifting academic research away from experiments so vulnerable to alteration. We owe the team and all their nameless victims a terrible and grievous debt.

7.

It's hot tonight. The street is long and blinding. Sweat is beading up around your bangs, making them stick to your skull like fly paper. You're carrying a body in the trunk of your car.

Traffic trickles in front of you, and you speed forward for a few yards before it stops again.

A billboard above you says something you spot out of the corner of your eye. "Data Science," in Russian and then Turkic and then English. A desperate job offer. At its side, a suited man holds up his thumb and grins maniacally.

For a moment, you could have sworn it said "Death Sentence."

You really need to get a grip.

In the grand scheme of things, what was one decrepit little man? An afterthought.

Traffic gushes open, then snaps shut again. Red lights glaze over your windows.

Every step of the process seems so innocuous in isolation. You could trace all these things back through time, but never so far that it was comforting. Someone in America discovers tobacco. Your mother has lung cancer. A dead man is rattling around in your trunk. One thing leads to another.

This traffic is really starting to get to you. You pull through a parking lot and onto a street you don't know the name of. It snakes between crumbling apartment blocks from the Soviet days where all the lights are dimmed down or disconnected. It's the kind of road you'd be scared to walk on alone.

Your headlights eventually roll over a chain link fence that separates people of decency from the Rust District. You reach to the backseat of your car and slip an air mask over your head. Nobody is going to follow you once you're beyond it.

With a click of car locks, you slide your feet onto the gravel. A cursory glance serves to reassure you again that you're alone. As your trunk yawns open, your eyes flit over the body one last time. He's missing quite a few teeth. The crater in his bald, mole-speckled head has long since caked into a scab about the size of your palm. It's too dark to make out much more than that, thankfully.

You hoist him over your shoulder. He's no more than fifty kilos, if you had to guess. With no shortage of flourish, your feet root themselves into the fence's divots and hinges, and you land with all the grace of a starling on the gravel below.

If they let Espers into the Olympics, maybe you'd be an acrobat. Instead, you're a murderer.

Nothing has lived in this place for quite some time, human or otherwise. The awesome expanse of the Rust District is something few people get to see up close, but it's absolutely fascinating in person. In the harsh beam of your flashlight, you catch the steady gradient of green to red as you trace trees into the distance, finding monolithic radio towers and Red Army bunkers bearing the years on straining supports.

There is a ghost in the emptiness, a hole in the air where bugs used to chirp but don't anymore. You can imagine it must have once smelled like sweet pine here. If you weren't wearing a ventilator, your nose would fill with pennies and gasoline.

You usually hear from older people that the world is too strange to live in now, that things were better in golden days long passed. Even in an age where nothing is sensible anymore, the minds of young people are not of such stiff stuff that the world can't go on. It rarely crosses your mind that the Rust District wasn't always here, though it certainly crosses your mind now.

A generation ago, the Soviets killed political prisoners by the thousands here. Golden days indeed.

You glance over the side of the road, allowing your flashlight to meander among bushes. Curled under burnt-orange leaves that snap under your feet, a stray cat corrodes into canyon-red rust and socket bolt bones.

Your eyes dart back to the road. It's a long way to carry a body.

In the vast distance, your only frame of reference are crumbling, angular monoliths against a milky-gray sky polluted by the lights of Glenovo, now miles away. Under two massive blocks of darkness, a bluish-green argon lamp flickers on and off between jungly plumes of rusting grass.

The periodic quiver in its glow is too deliberate to be coincidence. One-two-three. It clicks at regular intervals. You respond with two clicks of your flashlight in kind.

A man, only a shadow from so far away, rises from underneath the light and puts a pistol in his pocket. He waves a wiry hand in the air, and you return the greeting.

“Put him down in the grass!” he yells. His voice is sharp and tinny like the squeal of a tea kettle. Even a hundred meters away, it still scrapes in your ear. You do as he asks.

When he finally reaches you from across the darkness he’s out of breath. His gas mask, like yours, drips with condensation. Sputtering over himself, he points to the old man and you run your flashlight over him.

“That’s our guy,” the man confirms between muffled heaves.

You ask him what exactly he wanted with this fossil.

“He’s a professor,” he mutters, and turns the corpse’s head to look at the bloody crater in its skull.

“Fuck,” he says with a whistle, “You really did a number on the old bastard.”

You ask him what being a professor has to do with it.

“I hate to tell you,” he snorts, “But he’s just some researcher who looked into pseudo-science psycho-babble Tomov didn’t care to let slide.”

Your brow furrows. You ask him what exactly he was studying. Maybe he was slicing open grandmas or growing diseases in petri dishes or something like that. Anything really, as long as you didn’t kill a stranger for nothing.

“I don’t know. I don’t care that much,” the man says, “And what’s it matter to you? You made a couple million rubles either way.”

A couple million rubles. That came out to around fifty thousand Marks for the life of this professor. No small sum for your station in life.

Just curious, you mutter.

“Say, you’re a German aren’t you?” he asks, a little enthused.

You confirm his suspicions.

“Tomov knows a few other Espers from Germany around here. They’ve been looking for someone reliable like you, though I doubt you’re too keen on all that bullshit.”

You tell him you’ll think about it. He rises from the corpse and claps his hands together, rubbing dirt between them.

“Then I think that’s everything. Sorry to drag you all the way out here, but it’s the only place you can dump a body anymore.”

He’s not wrong. In a matter of weeks, the old man will be a pile of metallic spines and filaments. If you were to wander off the roads, you’d find dozens of bodies like his, reduced to oxidizing scrap. To afterthoughts.

You tell him it’s no problem if the money’s in your hands by next week.

“Sure,” he chitters, “We could even go out for drinks. If you’d like.”

You look the man over. His baggy clothes wrap up around him like a khaki-colored cocoon. Neither of you can tell much between your masks, beyond that you’re a woman and he’s a man.

You tell him you’ll think about that too. You’re too tired and too sober for flirtation.

By the time exhaustion starts to settle in, the fence is coming into view again. On your marathon hike, mother nature has shown you no kindness. You scratch your neck and find the swelling little welt of a mosquito bite. Dried sweat coagulates your hair into blonde masses that peel off your cheeks. Maybe when you’ve gotten an opportunity to clean yourself up, you’ll have the bandwidth to scrutinize your conscience more closely. For now, guilt doesn’t even intrude on your mind.

Something else does.

You stop in your tracks. A kind of dark and unnatural vertigo overwhelms you in an instant, a dread so powerful and so horrifying you can barely breathe. Your skin scuttles with sweat, slowly and mercilessly crawling across your pores like flies on the face of livestock. Your eyes dart into the humming darkness, but everything is invisible. All the indistinct shapes of the night spiral hypnotically into each other, winding towards a center you can't find.

In the distance, a mangled shadow is cast against the fence.

The shadow sends its body into the beam of your flashlight.

The body trickles through the light like an infection.

The infection overwhelms everything the entity touches.

The entity hesitates, its body looming in open air.

The body sends a shadow into the beam of your flashlight.

In the distance, a mangled shadow is cast against the universe.

You want to look away. You turn off your flashlight but you can still see it. You can still see it, and the darkness is a black, empty sheet behind it.

“You’ve-done
A-thing-you-do-not-understand.”

It speaks each word in isolation, the way a child reads picture books. It is painstaking and sickly and filled with a kind of vocal static, as if spoken through a record player made of meat.

“Your-situation-is-not-yet-irrecoverable,
but-was-a-fatal-oversight.
The-good-doctor, now-decaying-in-these-woods,
Was-our-finest-operator.

In-time, his-findings
Would-permit-certain
Avenues-of-thought-which, for-most-men,
Are-now-unthinkable.

It-is-curious
That-in-the-absence-of-foresight,
Humans-kill-for-sentimental-reasons.

Do-you-know-who-I-am?”

You ask if it is your messenger.

“No, but-I-am-a-messenger.

Yours-had-found-it-difficult
To-penetrate-your
Mind, and-was-unable
To
Dissuade-your
Murderous-impulses.

A-more-drastic-course
Of-actions-must-now-be-taken.
One-I-do-not-favor.

Tell-me,
What-was-your-goal-in
Killing-the-doctor?"

You told it that you needed money. For your mom.

"You-seem-to-value
Her-life-enough
To-do-things-you-would-otherwise
Consider-impossible.

Would-her-life-be-sufficient-incentive
To-do-the-impossible
Again?"

You say that it would.

"Then-she-will-live
For-twenty-nine-years
and-seventy-days
And-you-will-be-a
Replacement."

You ask if it's really possible to cure her, just like that.

"It-is-trivial

In-comparison-to
The-tasks-of-our
selected-subjects.

The-actions-of-such-operators
In-circumstances-of-pivotal
Significance
Can-be-amenable
To-seemingly-unrelated
Goals.

Though-we-cannot-dominate
Your-actions-directly,
Anyone-can-be-placed
In-a-sufficiently-inescapable-corner,
As-you-have.

Your-explicit-agreement
Is-therefore-unnecessary.
You-have-no-other
Course-of-action
Remaining.

In-due-time,
You-shall-come
To-be-wise
In-these-matters

And-others
Like-them.”

And like waking from a dream, it’s over.

Sporadically rising through your mind are grim images of the old man, the spot on his head, the shadow in the fence, the dream of a car accident this morning.

Your mouth drips with nauseous drool. You’re going to vomit, but to take off your mask would be suicide. Hot fluid is already rising to your lips. By the end of your hacking fit, your nose is bubbling in brown, acidic puddles. Every breath saturates your mask’s filter, and the flow of air comes to a sputtering stop.

Your fingers dig beneath your chin and claw the mask from your face, loosing a flood of frothing bile onto the iron grass. You break into a full sprint, strangling your nose with pinched fingers.

The fence is about a tennis court away from you now. A bolt of lightning runs up your calf and into your wailing lungs. You tumble to the ground and your vision prickles with peppered halogen lights.

A single inbound breath slips between your digits.

You clamber up the fence and fall painfully to the other side. A hand on your face finds flakes of pale flesh peeling and sticking to your fingertips. Everything smells like a caustic doppelganger of your dinner that evening.

People had survived one or two breaths in the Rust District. Iron Necrosis took more than that to set in, but didn't take much. If you had it, and it was possible you did, you'd die gasping for air as bronchi, trachea and esophagus all corroded like old nails in your chest. Most people would kill themselves before it got that far.

It was a grim thought.

After some time laying still, you rise from the ground, pick brown-red pebbles from your fingernails, and look into your car.

Shambling on the seat, could it really be..?

A cicada. A cicada in a locked car.

A divot in its head between two massive marble eyes, like a crown of red rust, craters into the place where its brains should be. It limps on its forelegs in aimless semi-circles, spinning in the throes of death.

Its mind is surely long gone by now. Would it be better to just crush the little bastard into a fine, white paste? Even if bugs have feelings, this one certainly doesn't. Couldn't.

You allow it to crawl onto your hand and it stops. You place it on the ground, and it drags itself in endless circuits all over again like a tin soldier too tightly wound. All other thoughts of the supernatural and impending demise escape you. You're transfixed.

It fruitlessly meanders, guided by some misfiring reflex or nervous tick, and a circle starts to form in the gravel behind it.

No, not a circle. A figure-eight.

There is a strange tendency in humans, Espers especially, to grant significance to entirely innocuous events like these on account of their rarity. There is an equal tendency to anthropomorphize the intentions of animals. It is completely absurd to relate to a dying, diseased insect or to dare interpret intelligence in its filmy eyes. It is absurd, but you can't help yourself.

You start the car, shift gear-on-gear into reverse, and peel away into the night. A strange ennui strikes your soul, one you can't quite explain but which is more potent than guilt and fear for now. In the deafening crackle of rocks, you have no idea if the cicada wandered under your tires. It's too dark to see from your rear window either way.

8.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

“This is interpretation 112 of Subject 55-22's interview, the so-called ‘Cicada Dream,’ performed by Garry Eugene Moore. As part of standard procedure, I'm going to outline every detail of the room where I'm sitting, how I'm feeling, anything that could set me off.

I'm in a leather chair. I'm quite comfortable, slightly tired. According to the thermostat, it's 72 degrees Fahrenheit in my office. It's about a quarter to four. That's four AM, not PM. A green glass lamp on my desk is the only light I've left on. Next to it, I've got a pen, pipette and interview pad all lined up vertically. My ampoule is resting in its stand at the left corner, and the code on the back of the bottle reads 'Compound T-7. Stable. Xenon packaged.' I think that's everything.

Since about noon, I've been giving this interview all my attention. By now it's the stuff of water-cooler legend. The uncrackable case. The riddle without an answer. The Cicada Dream. So I did some thinking, and I'm starting to seriously consider whether the guy made up some or all of it.

The alternative would be just as baffling. We've had a hundred Ministry Interpreters on this interview. I'm flipping through it now, and it's so marked up I can barely read it. I mean, fair enough, it's a pretty provocative dream, there's plenty of angles you could look at it from.

Excuse me for a second, I need another cup of coffee before I mull all of this over again.

TRANSCRIPTION NOTE: A door is heard opening, then closing. Forty-six seconds later, the door opens again.

Sorry about that. It's late. Anyway, the fact is that anything with real meaning would have been interpreted by now. For that matter all the symbols we've previously encountered are nowhere to be found. There's no circle in the dirt. There's no machine voices. There's no flies on a heart, storm brewing in the

coffee-dark sky, slight sensation of dread as a voice says a single word, so I have to wonder—in fact I’m obligated to wonder—whether or not he’s telling the truth. If none of the symbols are there, he’s omitting them. Final answer.

I shouldn’t be ranting so early, I haven’t even taken the drip yet. Again, standard procedure, I’m going through the steps verbally.

I take the ampoule.

TRANSCRIPTION NOTE: A crack of glass is heard.

I open it. I take the pipette. I fill the pipette. I carefully place a pea-sized drop onto my tongue. And for the grand finale, I swallow.

Mm. It’s bitter as hell. They won’t even tell me what’s in this stuff. Whatever works, I suppose. Trial and error chemistry. That’s how we got the symbols in the first place.

The list is a mile long, established over so many interviews... I don’t even want to think about it. It’s condensed and elaborated, revised and refurbished, but *wrong*? Decades of research can vouch for its validity. The idea that something *new*, something *unheard of*, could be in this dream, is laughable.

But let’s humor it while the drip sets in.

To get the obvious out of the way, I don’t think this dream is about youth. It’s the most obvious interpretation you could make. A cicada is associated with

immortality, recurrence, death and rebirth, all related to youth, sure, but just youth in itself? That would be a juvenile analysis. Pun not intended.

You might be tempted to draw on Dyonisian ecstasies also associated with the cicadas: their song, their orgy, that kind of thing. While these are tangential to youth, they obviously aren't the essential fact of youth either. I don't know if you've ever experienced adolescence, but it's not so romantic. In fact, it's a tragic thread of human life that we end our childhood not by a shedding of shells, but by slow, torturous transformation over years of painful bodily disharmony. Maybe cicadas have us beat there.

To keep my opinion brief, this dream can't be about youth. It's too sugar-coated for that. Then again, I'm also pretty jaded about all of this. I'm old enough to have a laugh about youth and all its ennui, however painful it may have been all those years ago. I can even trick myself into wishing I could go back.

Is that really such a good thing?

Dammit. This is what the drip does to you. It makes you question everything. Questions are all anyone seems to care about anymore, so here's a question for you: is it better to live to watch your youthful romanticism fade, or to be splattered under shoes and tires before you can? Is it better to die in a massive, humming orgy of passion, or to live to see your sexual function fold up and crumble like wet paper?

And is that all there is to this dream?

I'm digressing. It's hard to explain how the drip makes you feel when it really gets brewing. Like you're on the verge of something profound, maybe even the answer, but it's just out of reach. It makes you feel so entangled in the meaning of it all, and then makes you wonder if meaning isn't just an empty circle of a word. It takes you on a high peak, shows you all the kingdoms of the universe, almost yours, and then lets you fall. But the drip won't catch you. No, it will let you fall.

Is profundity just a chemical feeling? Rhetorical question. It is. These are mere chemicals. Vacuous arrangements of the atoms. Malfunctions of rational thought. A silhouette of sublimity. A critique of radio static.

TRANSCRIPTION NOTE: A clink of glass is heard.

Falling forever.

Lucifer. Icarus. The cicadas.

A more informative comparison—I haven't seen it in prior notes—could be drawn between cicadas and classical depictions of fairies. It would at least explain some of their stranger behaviors in the dream. Like fairies, they evade us with total magical ease, though real cicadas are not so nimble. Like will-o-the-wisps, the cicadas draw us out into the forest and amuse themselves by taunting us. Again, real cicadas do no such thing. With all these incongruities, it seems natural to assume that cicadas aren't the entity in question anymore. We are following the shadow of something much more cryptic and elusive. Something old.

Our species has only recently been tempted to chase the metaphorical fairy into the woods. We once were content to explain anything we couldn't understand with folktales and superstitions. The fairy, and by extension the cicada, seems to me like an ideal representative for the uncanny in our gestating interpretive framework.

There's only one thing I can't quite parse. Their fabled propensity for stealing infants, probably their single most famous trait, has no clear reference in this dream. I really don't know what to make of this.

Actually, it's coming to me like lightning.

It's so clear that I can see it through the pad.

It's whispering in my ear now.

I can hear cicadas in its cadence.

Fairies taking children.

Taunting chatter leading us to darkness, to unthinkable atrocities, to an orgy so great even death can't stop it.

Laughable.

GC-Platinum. The unknown. The kids we killed. Our unwillingness to stop. I think it knows everything.

And the more I listen, the more that great humming noise sounds like laughter.

I...

I've heard enough.

I'm not listening to you anymore."

TRANSCRIPTION NOTE: A door is heard opening.

END TRANSCRIPTION

9.

Living architecture. Feral approach of horror. Cross-section of liquid stone. Vineyards of sin. Flies on a heart. Chain-interspersed spinal ducts. Varicose termination field. Dimensions of thought alien to description. Aberrant temporal syncopation of coinciding caustatum. Crucifixion confluence. Categorically contradictory arachniform. Gall tincture impales damnation spears. Superconscious metaphor. Circle in the dirt. Lemniscate in the gravel. *Ignis fatuus* mental spiral.

10.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 1

Found this journal. Will write more soon.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 2

Still haven't found somewhere I can safely write. Working on it.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 3

I haven't seen a plane in at least three weeks. That makes me think they aren't coming. It also might mean there's nobody left to save.

I may be completely alone out here.

Finally reached the top of Crucible Tower, no thanks to the elevator. Probably no power here in weeks. Even in this nightmare, I somehow end up back at work. Figures.

I wish I'd thought to bring a camera. I just can't do justice to it all. The way everything is moving, undulating, teething on itself, licking fruitlessly at windows and concrete with pronged tongues as thick as my neck. The whole world is a curious baby putting everything in its mouth, and I can't see where it ends. It just goes on and on until the horizon swallows it. Swallows everything. That's how I'd describe Famine IV.

If not for this binder, I might not be able to record my thoughts at all. Pure white laminated pages, populated exclusively using dry-erase markers. It's delightfully, miraculously artificial. My little preserve of lifeless, motionless plastic worth its weight in gold.

So, since long-term survival is out of the question, I'm going exploring. Who knows, maybe my fiancé is out there somewhere. She was always adventurous. We loved hiking. She'll know what to do if she's still alive.

If she isn't, well, I tried.

I checked our apartment last week. No luck finding her, but I did manage to grab my half of our outdoor gear. Romeo that I am, I even sacrificed one of my precious laminated pages to leave a note for her.

If this is my last entry, there's a machete and a crank flashlight downtown.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 4

Still alive. Walking the north interstate tonight. I unscrewed the gas cap on a crashed sedan, and the smell of congealing blood practically seared my nose hairs off.

I could've guessed. A few thin, pumping veins had meandered up from the tires and under the gas door. Apparently Famine IV has a very loose definition of what it can and can't biologically incorporate. Why it ignores me but gleefully converts ethanol to blood is a total mystery. I have no fucking clue.

There are sporadic streaks of fatty membrane replacing what was once garden mulch, and I've been melting them into tallow for candles in one of my thermoses. I gathered at least a week's worth from a particularly rich neighborhood with its

own communal vegetable garden. Call me Robinson fucking Crusoe. Or Robin Hood. Or robbing in general.

Still no vegetation yet. The only green I've seen for miles is lichen colonies. While I was hopping fences, not once did I find a bush, tree or weed that hadn't been mutated into a fleshy art piece. Even the grass wasn't spared, and the lizard-tongue lawns painted my shoes in a thick coat of phlegm with every step. I'm still cleaning them off.

All of this could just as easily be plants. My shoes could be coated in pine sap, my thermos could be full of nectar, chlorophyllous jungles could gird the world but they don't. Famine IV decided on meat.

It's dead. It's been dead. Famine IV can't fucking decide on anything.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 5

The highway's leading nowhere. I'm planning to walk towards Famine IV's corpse on the west side of the city.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 6

I thought seeing its body would make me feel better, or at least reassure me that it's dead and gone. It didn't.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 7

It's raining now. Broke into a tourist hotel, and my socks are drying on the reception desk. Dark as hell. Pure obsidian black between flashes of lightning and my flashlight.

How do I explain Famine IV?

Imagine two pairs of antlers the size of the Golden Gate Bridge, coming together to form a kind of square pyramid. Imagine those antlers are segmented, stilt-like legs, connected in an asymmetric web of knotted joints that by way of their position should have no motor function. Then imagine through some gut-wrenching deformation they do. Imagine a knot of tumorous, dangling organs caught in the expanse, how they swing and twirl like trapezists and ballet dancers, climbing from rib to rib like monkey bars, attaching and detaching from winking orifices, pulsing and rearranging with no visible purpose. Imagine a bushel of human limbs clawing and groping at it all. And if you do, you've imagined a cartoon.

I'm sleeping in the basement. It seems like that's the only room with no windows and the curtains are all gibbering.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 8

Pretty fucking stupid idea as it turns out. I woke up to puddles of stagnant rain pooling at my feet. Flash flooding seems like it could be a real problem now that there's no watershed to speak of. Worse, the basement door is decorated with long helical spirals of teeth and gums, effectively barricading the stairwell. I found the knob beading with droplets of gray water on the floor, spat a good two meters away. No luck hacking at the door with the machete either.

I'm not trusting wooden doors anymore.

Since I had nowhere to go, I descended another flight of concrete stairs and found a heavy-duty boiler room. That all culminated in another flight of stairs and another door. Pitch-fucking-black I might add, so when my flashlight died I practically shit myself. A good few minutes of cranking the thing in total darkness, water rushing, mouth-door gurgling, and I was right back to it.

I swung open the door, but it was just oily dark all over again. So dark that the halo of my flashlight couldn't even reach its end; four long, featureless rectangles of concrete, spearing into a vanishing point far beyond the beam. A few PVC pipes clung to the right wall, a kind of echoey, hollow gurgle vibrating out from where they met the ceiling. And I just couldn't fucking move.

If there was anything down there, and my mind conjured more than a few ideas, all that splashing around and cranking and breathless hyperventilating would have led it right to me. I don't know why I'm so convinced of this.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 9

Nowhere else to go. The mouth-door spread out so much that I couldn't even get back up the stairs.

JOURNAL 1, ENTRY 10

I jittered around pacing and smoking cigarettes for a while before I could force myself to go in. You'd pussyfoot too if you'd seen it.

Thirty paces in, my light just stopped penetrating any deeper. I first thought there was a smooth, flat wall painted blacker-than-black, but I reached out to touch it and my hand went right through, smoky plumes of dark flying everywhere.

For a few seconds, I was actually relieved. The unnatural length of the hall was just a trick of perspective centered around this strange dark spot.

Up until that moment of realization, I had assumed that Famine IV's effects would always resemble something at least amenable to existing life. Teeth in the floor moulding. Mouse hearts buzzing around on cicada wings. That kind of thing.

But then I was looking at pollen darkness.

I had no idea whether or not it was a kind of pollen, but it had that same floral odor. Either way, Famine IV hadn't used any obvious plant elements before. Had it—do I dare use the word—learned this? The only alternative was that it had created something new with no parallel native to our world, a vapor so dark it was like walking into outer space.

And what did my goldfish brain think of first? Light a candle. Amusingly enough it worked. Not just pollen darkness, but Luddite darkness too. Go figure.

A good fifteen paces further, and the hallway ended in a prong of steel doors to the left, right and center.

Now here's where that goldfish brain of mine started cranking. I threw open the left door, poked my head in, and then clicked the flashlight. Nothing. So I poked my head in the right door, clicked the flashlight, and what do you know, a thin layer of black pollen was pooling on the floor and nowhere else.

It was a break room—infested with insects, scuttling and chewing on coffee grounds in tubular glass brewers, but still a welcome reprieve. The flowery smell of pollen gave way to something rotten and fungal in there. My nose led me to a damp, warm refrigerator where month-old containers sat speckled with mold. Almost as soon as I threw it open, flies rushed into plastic bags and styrofoam cartons, probing and prodding at every possible opening.

Well, you can probably tell I'm too curious for my own good. I had to see what was inside of them, so I pulled out a sagging, wet-bottomed box which immediately disintegrated into pulp between my fingers. Thin, stringy noodles blossomed from its seams as I adjusted my grip.

Something felt wrong. Frayed fibers clumped together around a central, wet mass: a ball of hair braided with unraveling paper.

I was holding a piece of human scalp.

As soon as I realized, the flies realized too, spinning together in whining clouds that tickled across my hands. The box fell out of my hands and they followed into the poison-black vapor below.

The cardboard wasn't mutated around it. Nothing could have reached into the fridge to incorporate all this—not anything visible at least. Why would Famine IV overlook the box for its contents?

I had a striking little notion that it might not be incorporated at all. Some psycho might've just been keeping human meat in a box. Outlandish as it was, that's what my mind stuck to.

My foot slipped against a divot in the floor and onto the tile. Flies swarmed around me, up the legs of my pants, under my shirt, into my sleeves, across my face, plumbing my nostrils, flicking tongues over my sclera, and I just screamed and shook like a maniac. The floor was a fucking ocean of them, living and breeding in clouds of dark. Tendrils of dust followed as they swooped in and out of oil pools, returning and retreating from my mad thrash with sadistic hivemind lust to devour and brood in my every orifice.

I could feel the floor creak beneath me, but it only struck me how unstable it was by the time I was falling through it. Falling forever.

Maybe the flies carried their future brood nest on their backs, cushioned my fall with their shiny green shoulders. Maybe their splattered bodies were a sordid trampoline for my left flank when it struck tile. Probably not.

I tried my flashlight, and a splintered, yawning gape in the floor above provided the only visible purchase. Gallons of dark vapor cascaded like drool into the room below.

I flicked my lighter, and the void of gurgling pipes above gave way. Another long hallway, this time girded with mossy bricks. Looking over the procession of soldier doors to my right, I noticed a strange resemblance to the upper rooms I'd searched the night before: black, numerically embossed, and most striking of all, still wooden. There was a grotesque symmetry with the hotel above, but I was at least twenty feet beneath it.

What could they possibly be here for?

101, 102, 103, 104.

I followed the hall room by room, testing knobs fruitlessly.

105, 106, 107, 108.

By then I was trying doors just to hear something over the rush of water.

109, 110, 111.

I stopped when my hand brushed against something flimsy.

A plastic sign sat hooked against the knob, swayed like a pendulum when I retracted my hand.

“Don’t Service,” glinted in fat gold letters on its surface.

I yanked it from the door and turned it over in my hand. Delightfully, miraculously artificial. Untouched by organic intervention, like my book. Words that could never change, never metastasize, never move or bleed.

I fumbled the sign into the dark. Maybe I was shaking. Maybe I was holding it too delicately. I don’t know. By pure muscle memory I scrambled for my flashlight, and there was no pollen to speak of. Everything lit up again.

As I scanned the floor, the golden words finally shone into my eyes.

And this time, they said “Death Sentence.”

10.

Letter to the Ministrix

Dr. Alexander O. Krause
4402 Valley View Drive
Boston, MA 02110

October 11th, 1986

Ministry for Enigmatic Command



To the Central Committee,

My team has constructed a timeline of events as they occurred during the Room 16 Incident, accounting for CCTV footage, communication timestamps and on-site radionuclide sampling. We have additionally provided immediate recommendations in light of this evidence.

TIMELINE:

3:42 AM, GMT-10: Garry E. Moore begins interpretation 112 of Subject 55-22's interview.

3:43 AM, GMT-10: CCTV captures Moore as he leaves his office to retrieve a cup of coffee.

3:51 AM, GMT-10: Moore leaves his office again. He appears visibly agitated and paces back and forth. This continues for approximately thirty-six minutes.

3:54 AM, GMT-10: Morphogenic Inhibitors detect extra-spatial alteration within Moore's office. Alteration Alert is sent to Room 16 response staff.

4:01 AM, GMT-10: Alteration Alert received. Facility lockdown procedure begins.

4:04 AM, GMT-10: Moore's head unfolds.

10:07 AM, UTC-4: U.S. Administrative staff receive Room 16 Alteration Alert.

4:12 AM, GMT-10: Morphogenic Inhibitors detect Antipattern Awareness Event in Room 16 West Wing, Floor 2. This location is within fifty feet of Moore's office.

4:15 AM, GMT-10: Moore possesses six new joints along his left femur, right humerus and manubrium. His lower rib cage rises by approximately nine inches.

10:12 AM, UTC-4: Emergency Countermeasure Team GC-Phosphorous scrambled to Room 16. Arrival anticipated within six minutes.

4:16 AM, GMT-10: Moore's spine bends along his thoracic vertebrae at an estimated angle of 78°. Breakage results in significant blood loss.

4:22 AM, GMT-10: Room 16 staff evacuation begins.

10:24 AM, UTC-4: Administrative staff receive current fatality estimation of 17. Most attributed to bodily torsion or rapid-onset malignant tissue accumulation.

4:24 AM, GMT-10: Emergency Countermeasure Team GC-Phosphorous arrives at Room 16.

4:27 AM, GMT-10: Moore's body accumulates between 5 and 7 metric tons of uninhibited organ tissue growth.

4:28 AM, GMT-10: Moore's accumulation of organ tissue exceeds volumetric bounds of Room 16 West Wing. Catastrophic structural failure compromises major support beams, resulting in 45 casualties.

4:29 AM, GMT-10: Gamma-ray spectrometers indicate ^{237}Np , ^{235}U and ^{131}I in high concentration, resulting in dangerous radiation levels fluctuating between 2.2 Sv/h and 4.1 Sv/h in the West Wing courtyard.

4:31 AM, GMT-10: GC-Phosphorous engages.

4:35 AM, GMT-10: Room 16 quarantined. Evacuations continue over the next six hours.

11:56 AM, GMT-10: Kinetic bombardment collapses Room 16. 207 later casualties attributed to radiation exposure.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

I don't feel the need to go into much detail regarding the Room 16 Environment properties. We have been documenting them for months now. To summarize, it produces aberrant gravitational bands in the island's northern

tidal sandbars. These have since overtaken any natural terrain not obliterated during the incident. The effective Environment cannot expand beyond the fifth island of the Harpy Archipelago, and parasitic reef expansion continues within its borders. Worsening irradiation has prevented further sampling expeditions.

Our timeline provides sufficient evidence that Environment criteria are functionally identical to Antipattern Awareness criteria. Maladaptive bodily alteration was always a possibility we considered, but was never formally associated with A.A. events until now. So many safe A.A. events occur daily—including full neurological rewirings—that their relationship to catastrophic mutation was previously quite murky.

Our response to this development should be swift and measured. Mass casualties and Environment incorporation, especially in populated areas, are simply not acceptable side-effects of psychedelic experimentation. It is our recommendation that chemical tests under projects VERDATA, MKULTRA and PTMORPH discontinue immediately. International consensus should oppose the usage, sale and production of recreational psychedelic drugs, with special consideration given to the extermination of *Datura stramonium*, *Lophophora williamsii*, *Salvia divinorum*, *Banisteriopsis caapi* and other naturally occurring psychotropic vegetations. The U.S.S.R has already commissioned such exterminations within its sphere of influence following the Glenovo Rust Disaster.

We have thus far avoided disclosing catastrophic mutation through false reports of extraterrestrial activity, unsafe nuclear testing and rogue Espers. It

will become increasingly difficult to do so in the future. Mutation will continue to threaten population centers and research sites if measures are not taken to prevent it. Our team believes it may be effectively contained through mass trepidation around psychedelic drugs. Their risk is increasingly apparent, and being prolifically abundant in some form or another, psychedelics and their danger can only be eliminated if the populace chooses to eschew them.

As our final recommendation, we advocate for the public disclosure of catastrophic mutation as a phenomenon. The Ministry for Enigmatic Command will disincentivize the use of recreational psychedelics by doing so, further reducing the likelihood of future incidents. Public broadcasts and press releases with descriptions of the above events may prove effectively visceral. Naming convention should invoke the religious and apocalyptic where necessary.

11.

It is the 112th day of my incarceration. I had another dream last night.

I was in an empty glade, and dew like ice prickled my every touch. Distant from me, a fire burned in a dark place where the moon could not reach. I approached until the shape of a man became seen by the flicker of the flame, emerging out from the night, and I stopped. Like me, he was naked. Like me, he was thin and cold. Unlike me, he refrained to shudder when the wind carried its chill through the clearing.

My body drew together with each needle of cold. Icy white droplets cascaded in the air wherever moonlight caught them. But the figure, statue, soldier, had not flinched. Not even breathed.

At length I came to the fire and beheld him and for terror his head. At four places it folded outward into triangles craning from the seat of his neck. On each, the gape of a mouth, nose, ear or eye sat empty, filled only with long twitching shadows cast by the embers.

I understood that he had no tongue. Language was trampled under his heel. I knew too that I had another tongue, a tongue of the inner world, lips of noble ornament, and I kissed his feet with them. Still he stood.

His head, like fern leaves, swayed limp in the gale. I asked if he was my messenger. Through the silence and a straightening of the wind-bent flame, I knew his answer.

By the second tongue, I formed the word of his way. A bird in the distance sang a foreign song that warbled through the leaves. In the call, I asked whether he was God or the devil.

All the cicadas buzzed with laughter.

I swallowed. A thin phlegm toyed with my breath. Moths flitted silent in the firelight, cast themselves into it, rose to the starless night in feathers of insect smoke. Beads of sweat formed on my spine. Moths fell dead. This was the worst possible reply. I offered a covenant to him.

The baying wind heaped fire to my brow. Hellfire. A dark magic. The magic of caustatum. And beyond the flame, ribbons danced mad over the world, climbed trees, licked hateful, deathless in needles of pine, approaching feral, the whole world burning behind. Fires squealed and spun through the air, joined in swarms. I spoke in many tongues to the people. Many people, like him, out from the burning world. Many messengers. Many spirits of the world.

I was at once a riddle spirit. I was coheir to their burning world, living among them, speaking their language, the language of the movements of the world. A lamb shambled out of the dark: the lamb of my unriddled spirit, carrying a heart laden with flies. They danced as it burned in frenzied cicada dance, headless, convulsing, a dance to unknowing. And the lamb limped silent in the firelight, limped into its venom tongues, burned with innocence incense.

The wind howled in a burst, and all was silent black. The many spirits of the world were swallowed into a secret fold. Again there was only he and I. Still he stood.

And hands held out for me, unfurling behind my head, the last symbols for confirmands: on the left the leaf of a fig tree, on the right its fruit.

It stooped to inscribe by circles in the dirt:

“Clothe thyself,
 feed thyself,
Iconoclast,
 Apostate unto cataclysm,”

I recounted all of this in the room, and the voice wavered. She asked me if I took the offered symbols. I told her I didn't.

Did I have anything more to say about the dream of cicadas?

By then it had been almost a month. How was it possible that they were still interpreting it?

She said they had banned all attempts. It was an inscrutable, dangerous dream, and its last interpreter was dead. Hundreds were dead. The chemicals used to read it were destroyed.

Was this the cataclysm she had told me about?

No, she answered.

The cicadas were communicants in both dreams, I surmised. And I was sorry for what happened because of the dream. That was all I had to say.

A pen clicked and she was silent for a moment.

I asked what had happened to the interpreter, and her voice quivered again. She mumbled that he had become a mass of malignant tumors possessed by the dream;

the entire research site was evacuated, now rimmed with veins of gravitational distortion, a wasteland of nuclear dust. Like a fucking A-Bomb went off.

This was the first time I'd ever heard her use such a word, or understood how serious the dreams were. Mine was no short stay. These dreams were so dangerous I might never leave this place. I could be suspended above the floor in that room until the day I died.

And that made me glad I'd lied to her.

13.

You hadn't lied when you said you'd think about drinks. After all the strange feelings passed over you, something in his crass innocence—or maybe his lack of any ability to feel guilt—was attractive. The moral questions hung suspended from the ground on helium balloons around him. You preferred it that way.

So, when your khaki-cocooned escort metamorphoses into a shaggy-headed goofball at your doorstep, you're actually pretty excited. You look him over through your apartment's peephole, watching him adjust his cream-colored jacket. He drags his feet against your doormat as if something was sticking to the bottom of his fat-soled boots.

Was he handsome? A little. He had a nice smile.

You keep your dialogue brief like your calls. He asks how you are. You lie and say you've never been better. He seems pleased and tells you he's invited the Germans. He hopes you don't mind. You don't.

He brings a sputtering little motorbike around that you thought might capsize under your collective weight. Somehow it manages. You really don't have anything to talk about—you barely know each other—so you spend most of the ride observing how his hands clasp against his torn rubber handlebars.

The sky seems alive with black stormy streaks, curving like veins around fat masses of gray. His hands are likewise veiny, wrapping up his arms in pale green lightning bolts. You're staring at them.

"We're having a good time, eh?" he yells over the wind.

What?

"Nothing." He pauses for a minute. "You'll like the Germans. They're better at talking."

You ask him if he really thinks so.

"Yes. Unless you're saying anything smart. They're sort of funny idiots. What about you?"

You tell him you aren't very funny. Unless you're drunk. Then you're a circus.

“Well, I’ll have to find out. We haven’t had clowns in Glenovo for years.”

Come on now, you tell him, there are plenty in politics. That makes him laugh. An awkward tea-kettle laugh, but it still counts.

A strange feeling swoops overhead in the silver. You think about your silver-haired mother: struggling to get her to eat, wasting time on television and idle banter. You’d come to her the night of the killing, but she was asleep. She was always asleep nowadays. You’d stood over her bed, feathery yellow-stained pillows strewn everywhere, sweat pouring over your brow, and watched the jagged air pass through her chest in the dark.

Cancer was cured. It was cured years ago for everyone but you. A celebrity gets cancer and it goes away tomorrow; an old woman is dying on a fold-out bed and poverty entombs her there. The stone is already rolled in.

No more. Your will is pure and undiluted and magmatic. You have taken destiny by its reins. You will break its bones if you have to.

And you will make this man your possession.

“You alright?” he says. “You’re looking at everything.”

By now you’d left behind weed-eaten destitution for vistas of rising hotels and preserves of old architecture: mere modern imitations, but no less colorful or intricate or attractive. You suppose that’s the intended effect. The illusion of history in a city without.

“Hey,” he repeats. “You alright?”

You tell him you’re fine as he stops the bike.

“You sure?”

Yeah. You just get lost in your head sometimes.

“Symptoms of a contagious infection, I’m afraid. For my tooth, it’s called thinking. Fortunately there’s an old cure. It’s foul medicine. But it’ll do just fine.”

You hope there’s no side effects. He laughs again.

“Not ‘till morning. And surprise! We’ve found a hospital for our spirits.”

Above you, neon Cyrillic cranes down in pinks and blues. It’s an absolute affront to your nostrils when the door swings wide. You imagine the sheer volume of salty human moisture needed to create that smell and your diaphragm flexes involuntarily.

The idol was even better in person. It towered over the tarmac and cast looming shadows from silver branches like a great metallic tree. In vast filament networks, phosphorus vapors streamed into lungs of strange metal. Its immense cordate wings stretched from swirling trunks and dispersed humming tones like tuning forks. A great pulsing heart of plutonium emitted ghostly blue radiation at its core, and through calcite capillaries flowed noble xenon.

I wish you were there to see it. Before we activated Icarus, there was a serene beauty to its mechanisms, how freely it arranged elementary particles to suit itself.